

DRUG SALES, RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY, AND NEIGHBORHOOD VIABILITY: SORTING OUT THE COMPONENTS OF A DIFFUSION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT Drug use and drug sales are not distributed uniformly across urban regions in either space or time. Communities pass from relatively drug free to drug infested both over time and across space. This article is a description of how drug dealers expand their sales outward from an initial foothold in a neighborhood in a contagious diffusion fashion eventually to dominate the social and economic life of the community. Current research identifies the property crime that surrounds drug sales locations as an important vanguard that softens the social fabric of a neighborhood and allows open street sales of drugs to take place without effective community resistance.

Drug use has always been with us. Pre-Columbian Indians used peyote and hallucinogenic mushrooms. Popular soft drinks such as Coca Cola contained cocaine until the beginning of this century. Drug use in one form or another is not new. What is new is the level of concern expressed by our citizens.

The level of concern expressed by our citizens is high due to new problems fostered by illegal drug use. Not only are the consumers of these drugs affected by their use, but whole neighborhoods are devastated by the crime committed to support a drug habit. In the past peyote and mushrooms could be gathered in the wild and soft drinks containing cocaine purchased cheaply, but today's drug merchants charge what the market will bear in urban communities where, strictly speaking, drugs do not grow in the wild. Drug users often turn to property crime to afford a drug habit. In this paper, we demonstrate that the spatial arrangement of property crime in the vicinity of drug sales areas acts as a symbiotic partner to destroy the social fabric of a neighborhood--a social fabric that is necessary to ward off drug sales activities successfully.

The spatial characteristics of the diffusion of drug sales at the wholesale level was identified by Rengert and Muller (1972). This research determined that at the hierarchical level, large-scale drug wholesalers initially chose major cities to establish drug sales enterprises. Once established in a city, the mechanics of local expansion of drug sales are not well understood. We postulate a hypothetical model of the establishment and diffusion of drug markets in an urban community which will serve as a basis to interpret the interaction of property crime with drug sales.

EVOLUTION OF A DRUG MARKET PLACE

In our hypothetical model of the evolution of drug sales at the local level, we postulate four stages that characterize levels of development of the drug market at the local level. We begin by describing a relatively drug-free region.

Stage 1: Casual Non-place-Specific Market

The initial sale of drugs in a region may be described as a casual non-place-specific market. Here, drugs are given, sold, or traded to friends at parties, high schools, or places where youth gather such as shopping malls. In this case, a supplier may or may not have surplus drugs to distribute. Furthermore, the purpose of the gathering is not to distribute drugs. The "customers" did not come to the location to obtain drugs. The distribution of drugs is a by-product of another function such as a party. Therefore, the distribution is not place specific and is not dependable. It may fluctuate from place to place and from time to time. It is a chance happening. However, at these chance gatherings, youth may develop a taste for drug use, which establishes a market demand and a profit potential for an entrepreneur. The spatial configuration of this stage varies from place to place and from time to time. Also, the supplier may vary from person to person. There is no dependable source and no advertising. Property crime is not directly related to this drug distribution stage.

Stage 2: Periodic Market

At stage 2, a periodic market may be established as a local entrepreneur takes advantage of a small local demand for drugs and sells them at specific times at specific places. For example, a supplier may establish himself outside a high school in the morning to sell to students on their way to school, at a local playground or basketball court to sell to young adults in the afternoon, and at a local bar to sell to customers at night. In other words, the seller moves to the customers during the day because there is not enough demand at any one location to establish a permanent base. Word-of-mouth advertising spreads knowledge as friends are introduced to the supplier. Since advertising is by word of mouth, customers are largely local residents of the area. However, property crime may begin as users become dependent and must find a means to support their emerging drug habit. Much of this crime may be stealing from parents and friends, and a few local burglaries and shoplifting. Note that the buyers are not traveling to a location necessarily to purchase drugs. The supplier travels to the location of potential customers. Market demand is not yet strong enough to support a full-time seller at a permanent location.

Stage 3: Place-Specific Sales

At this stage, the market demand for drugs in the region is great enough to support a full time supplier at a specific location. A specific location is occupied most of the time and becomes known locally as the place to purchase drugs. Examples of these places would be "crack houses" and "shooting galleries" for crack and heroin sales respectively. The supplier must choose a location whose nearest residents are disorganized enough not to know of or care, or who feel helpless to confront the drug supplier who is operating in their neighborhood. This is generally a deteriorating neighborhood along a transportation artery dominated by rental housing, industry, or an uncontrolled park.

The important characteristic of this stage is that for the first time, the customers come to the seller rather than the other way around. Word of mouth advertising expands the range of sales as customers come from surrounding communities to purchase drugs. Full time sellers are employed as sales expand. Property crime expands markedly as addicts

are formed and depend on crime to support their habits. The important point is to determine where this property crime is committed.

In an ethnographic investigation of drug dependent property criminals, Rengert and Wasilchick (1989) illustrated the spatial clustering of burglaries about drug sales locations. This crime focuses on the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the drug seller. Stable community residents in the surrounding neighborhoods will sense the deterioration of their local area. In fact, Taub, Taylor, and Dunham (1984) believe the existence of drug sales to be the most important determinant of neighborhood satisfaction in Chicago. Many will personally experience a residential burglary or street crime. They may decide to stay and fight back with increased community organization, block watches, and increased demands for police services. They also may harden their properties with alarms, bars on windows, and increased security especially at entry points of previous burglaries. In most cases, however, they will adopt a "bunker mentality". They will decrease their outside activities as the local streets become less safe. They will especially limit to the barest minimum their young children's use of outside spaces. The neighborhood will become a much less satisfactory place for family life.

Many of the family oriented residents will become dissatisfied with the community because of the deterioration in the quality of the neighborhood for family living. They will seek a safer environment in which to raise their families. Those who are financially able may move to a less crime-ridden neighborhood. This leaves abandoned homes as residents leave faster than they are able to sell their homes. Prospective home owners are reluctant to purchase homes in high-crime neighborhoods. This also reduces the remaining neighbors' ability to resist drug distributors and crime as the more stable members of the community move out.

As the neighborhood's ability to resist the activities of drug distributors and the associated property criminals decreases with the out-migration of stable community members, an opportunity is created for drug distributors to expand the spatial base of their activities. As the area becomes known as a source area for illegal drugs, the profits from sales expand greatly. Competing sellers will enter the market.

More than one supplier will now operate from the same neighborhood though not from the same location. Advertising will still be largely by word of mouth. Crime will focus on this area to such an extent that it will verge on being a "persistent high crime area" (Schuerman and Kobrin, 1986).

Stage 4: Drug Mart

The cycle of drugs-crime, crime-drugs continues. Property crime including burglary is now so common in the area that few or no opportunities for burglary remain in the area immediately surrounding the original seller. This area has been "fished out". Residents still living in the area have bars on their doors and windows, dogs, or are nearly always in their homes. Other homes are abandoned and stripped of valuables, even the copper pipe. Burglars in this area are now displaced into violent street crime such as purse snatching, mugging and drug theft. There are few if any burglary opportunities remaining.

Residential burglary now focuses on the zone surrounding the exhausted "fished out" area. This surrounding area also begins to lose community residents who can afford and want to leave. This leads to community disorganization in a new area which reduces the neighbors ability to resist the establishment of competing sellers who expand into their neighborhoods.

The range of sales (distance customers come to buy drugs) expands markedly as

buyers no longer must be familiar with the neighborhood (or the local habits of the supplier--where he will be and when) to purchase drugs. All they need to know is the location of the house from which drugs are distributed. As buyers begin to come from farther distances, many of them will come by automobile rather than by foot. To service these customers better, sellers will begin to distribute drugs from the street corner rather than from indoors. At this point, buyers do not even have to leave their cars to purchase drugs. They just make their way to the supplier's location and make their wishes known. Word of mouth advertising expands the range of sales as customers come from surrounding communities to purchase drugs from their cars.

The next step in the evolution of the drug market place requires a change in how the availability of drugs is advertised. In the previous stages, advertising is by word of mouth because legal media outlets are not available to sellers of illegal drugs. However, as the area becomes known as a notorious drug sales area, the human depravity of the addicts and sellers and the human suffering of the remaining residents becomes suitable fodder for print and electronic media seeking sensational stories. The resulting news coverage becomes free advertising that saturates the media market.

Reporters are sent into the area and file stories not only describing the exact location of the drug supplies, but also exactly how a stranger can purchase drugs at that location. Stories often include means of quality control: "yellow tape" cocaine is sold by the largest distributor in the area, other sellers may be selling talcum powder or other substitutes. TV spots illustrate how you can drive up, roll down your window and bargain for drugs. The importance of this "advertisement" is that nonlocal, often suburban buyers now know where to go and how to purchase drugs. Long- distance buyers (from the fringes of the media market) now frequent the area, creating additional customers and profits for sellers. This increases competition among sellers as they establish new locations on the main routes into the neighborhood to be the first to attract the long distance buyers. Most media stories include some mention about how ineffectual the police are, or how no matter what the police do it is business as usual within one hour of the arrests.

This is why this stage is termed a "drug mart." It has economic properties in common with automobile malls which enjoy agglomeration economies as customers focus on a single area. Both rely on advertising to draw customers from outside their immediate area. The distance from which the group of sellers can attract customers is much greater than the distance from which any one of them could attract customers. Therefore, sellers will attempt to be as close as possible to the "advertised" area but not so close as to create conflict with an existing drug seller. Geographers identify hexagonal sales areas around suppliers; spatial agglomeration may distort this pattern somewhat as many sellers act as a similar supply point much as agglomeration works for auto sales regions.

The drug sales region expands out in a contagious fashion as new sellers establish themselves as close as possible to existing sellers. Burglary and street crime open up new areas and make it possible to sell in previously stable communities that would have resisted drug sellers before property crime forced stable members to relocate spatially. In other words, property crime may act as the vanguard for drug sellers.

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